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Newsroom

Bogus Reviewed in New York Times

Professor Carl Bogus' new book, "William F. Buckley Jr. and the Rise of American Conservatism" is reviewed in the New York Times' Sunday Book Review.

From THE NEW YORK TIMES SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW: "[William F. Buckley Jr.: Right Man, Right Time](#)" by Geoffrey Kabaservice

Published: December 9, 2011 (Online); December 11, 2011 (Print)

BUCKLEY: William F. Buckley Jr. and the Rise of American Conservatism

By Carl T. Bogus

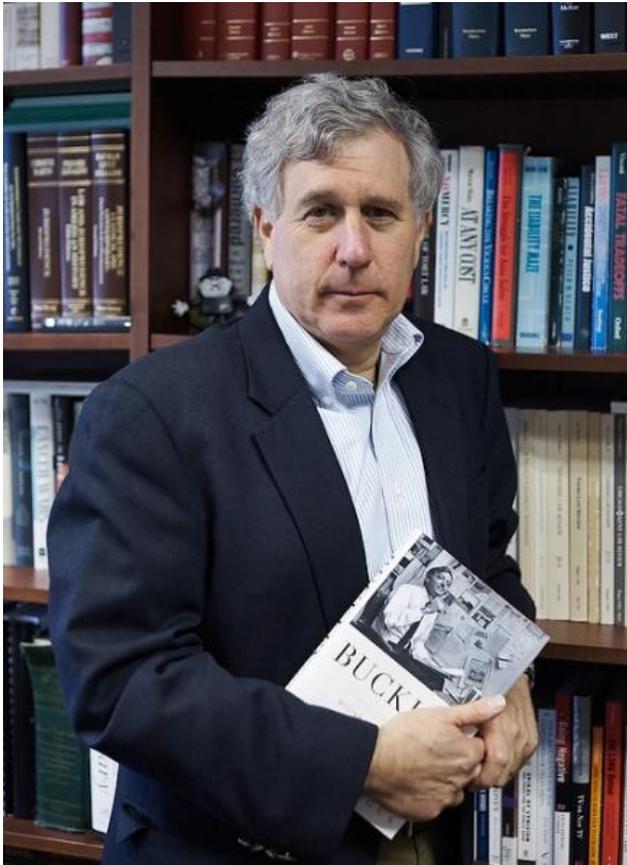
Illustrated. 405 pp.

Bloomsbury Press. \$30.



William F. Buckley Jr. was an immodest man with much to be immodest about. Not only was he the high priest of the modern American conservative movement and the founding editor in chief of its leading intellectual publication, *National Review*; he was also a gifted polemicist, best-selling novelist, sesquipedalian speaker, television star, political candidate, yachtsman, harpsichordist, wit and bon vivant. Small wonder that I once saw him nod approvingly when a tongue-tied freshman referred to his 1951 autobiographical best seller as "God as Man at Yale." He performed his many roles with such panache, and such obvious enjoyment of being William F. Buckley Jr., that he captivated people who otherwise would have despised someone who did much to move the United States politically to the right from the early 1950s until his death in 2008. But even liberals had to laugh when Buckley, asked whether he slouched in his chair as host of the TV program "Firing Line" because he couldn't think on his feet, drawled, "It is hard . . . to stand up . . . under the weight . . . of all that I know."

Perhaps the most notable distinction of **Carl T. Bogus's** generally admiring biography, "Buckley," is that **the author, a law professor at Roger Williams University,** is a self-professed liberal. At a time when liberals and conservatives agree on almost nothing, both sides can unite in their esteem for Buckley. What this unlikely convergence suggests, however, is that neither side has an accurate view of his real significance. The left misconceives his role as the founder of the conservative movement, and the right ignores how far the movement has diverged from Buckley's example.



Bogus aims to explain conservatism's rise to success by concentrating on Buckley during "the seminal period of the creation of the modern conservative movement," from the inception of *National Review* in 1955 to Richard Nixon's election in 1968. Much of the first half of the book nonetheless covers developments in conservative thinking in previous decades, analyzing the competing strains of traditionalism, libertarianism and early - neoconservatism.

Bogus identifies traditionalist conservatism with the views of the 18th-century British statesman Edmund Burke and his latter-day adherents, notably Russell Kirk and the short-lived "new conservative" movement of the early 1950s. The traditionalists venerated deeply rooted communities and cultures, and worshiped established institutions and elites. They feared transformative ideologies and capitalism's potential for creative destruction. Traditionalists did not resist all change, Bogus points out, but they were pragmatists

at heart: with Burke, they “believed that changes should be made carefully and with a healthy respect for the risks of unintended consequences.” Set against them were the libertarians, who advocated unfettered individual freedom and an unregulated free market, and the neoconservatives, whom Bogus somewhat anachronistically equates with the most aggressive cold war interventionists seeking to “roll back” Communism around the globe.

Buckley’s principal accomplishment, in Bogus’s view, was that he set the course of modern conservatism by siding with the libertarians and neoconservatives against the traditionalists. From his hierophant’s chair at *National Review*, he marginalized Kirk and the new conservatives and excommunicated extremists, including John Birch Society paranoids and Ayn Rand, whose atheism and materialism undermined his drive to make conservatism respectable. Buckley was not only the chief strategist and tactician behind the scenes of the conservative movement, but also conservatism’s “most visible representative.” He used his celebrity and skill at intellectual debate to attract new recruits, from Ronald Reagan and Pat Buchanan to Karl Rove and Rush Limbaugh, and to lead the movement toward political success, culminating in Reagan’s election as president in 1980. Bogus declares that “without Buckley and *National Review*, Reagan’s election would not have been possible.”

But this was a hollow victory, according to Bogus, since the right-wing ideology that Buckley brought to power betrayed what was best in the American conservative tradition as embodied by Robert Taft, the Ohio senator who dominated the Republican Party from the late ’30s through the early ’50s. Taft’s conservatism was essentially Burkean traditionalism, marked by pragmatism, prudence and skepticism toward aggressive foreign and domestic government schemes. If Buckley had not sidelined the traditionalist views of Taft and Kirk, Bogus argues, conservatism might have avoided its worst errors, including approval of Southern segregation, misdiagnosis of the cold war, support for military adventurism from Vietnam to Iraq, and cultivation of antigovernment attitudes that made a virtue of government incompetence and led to failures like FEMA under George W. Bush and the financial crisis.

Bogus is particularly good at using Burke, Kirk and Taft as Cassandra figures to bewail the wrong turnings of the right. His discussion of the various intellectual players is well informed, and he makes a useful contribution to understanding the contending variations of modern American conservatism. But his argument gets lost in a thicket of irrelevant digressions, from a recapitulation of “Atlas Shrugged” to a potted history of Vietnam, and loses sight of Buckley himself.

Bogus only sketchily describes Buckley’s life and work, *National Review*’s creation and development, and the growth of the conservative movement, all of which are covered in much greater depth in other books. While Bogus applauds Buckley’s success in building what he calls “the most successful journal of opinion

in history,” he disdains Buckley as a thinker. He maintains that Buckley “inherited his father’s philosophy,” which had been formed by Will Sr.’s experiences in the Mexican Revolution, and failed to modify those secondhand beliefs in response to the changing American context. Bogus gives short shrift to Buckley’s intimate knowledge of texts and thinkers his father never encountered, his intellectual mentors (notably Whittaker Chambers and Willmoore Kendall), and his books, none of which are analyzed in detail.

In flatly identifying Buckley as a libertarian and dismissing *National Review’s* “fusionism,” Bogus underestimates Buckley’s masterly ability to hold together a movement that was riven by internal contradictions. In truth, Buckley considered himself a traditionalist as much as a libertarian, and artfully refused to take either of those tendencies to their logical conclusions. He opposed fanatics of all stripes. As a committed Catholic, he resisted the libertarian impulse to undermine established authority and devolve into anarchy. And while Buckley respected traditionalists like Kirk and the Agrarians (whom Bogus doesn’t mention), he believed that Kirk was too fey in his medievalism, and the Southerners too openly desirous of owning black people, to allow them to dictate the conservative position. Bogus also overlooks Buckley’s pragmatic evolution, evident in his famous pronouncement that he would support “the most right, viable candidate” rather than the most uncompromising conservative. Indeed, Buckley’s pragmatism, tolerant spirit and intellectual sophistication are notably absent from the conservative movement today.

And yet Bogus’s attempt to credit the success of the conservative movement almost exclusively to Buckley is ivory tower history with a vengeance. Ideas have consequences, but they don’t make political realities by themselves. Liberals yearn for a Buckley of their own, someone who can build a movement on the left through the force of personality and philosophy. But they too often neglect the role of grubbier figures like William Rusher, Richard Viguerie and Paul Weyrich, none of whom are likely to attract admiring liberal biographers but who arguably did more than Buckley to mobilize conservatism as a political force at the grass roots. Until liberals see the history of the conservative movement whole, they are unlikely to learn from it.

Geoffrey Kabaservice’s latest book, “Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, From Eisenhower to the Tea Party,” will be published in January. A version of this review appeared in print on December 11, 2011, on page BR28 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Right Man, Right Time.

To read the full story, click [here](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/books/review/buckley-william-f-buckley-jr-and-the-rise-of-american-conservatism-by-carl-t-bogus-book-review.html?_r=2&). [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/books/review/buckley-william-f-buckley-jr-and-the-rise-of-american-conservatism-by-carl-t-bogus-book-review.html?_r=2&]

